

## Between oral history and ICT: on the creation of knowledge societies

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## **Working Paper N° 348**

### **Between Oral History and ICT: On the Creation of Knowledge Societies**

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## **Introduction: Glocalisation, Knowledge and Communication<sup>1</sup>**

Academic debates on the emergence of knowledge societies have extensively focused on the transition in northern countries and have yet to include southern countries. According to Nico Stehr, the importance of a cross-cultural discussion concerning the nature of knowledge, the locations of knowledge production, and the control of knowledge lies in the insight that knowledge is not only the key to the secrets of nature and society, but the key towards the becoming of the world (2003:22). One common characteristic of knowledge societies is the fact that a growing part of societal room for manoeuvre and of results of agencies is driven and governed by knowledge (Stehr, 2003:19). Empirical evidence in multiple sub-disciplines of sociology indicates that knowledge is one or even *the* major factor for contemporary societal change.

The new knowledge paradigm, however, reveals paradoxes: haven't southern countries always been knowledge societies? Hasn't knowledge always been the source of everyday agency whether in the field of medicine, agriculture or ecology ? The answer is a clear "Yes". Should we skip now our interest in research on knowledge in developing countries ? The answer is a clear "No". When conceptualising knowledge as a dynamic social process between actors, its new frame of reference lies in processes of globalisation and the new configuration in which knowledge is produced and generated: local and translocal. The interplay and communicative connections between localities constitute "glocalisation" (Robertson, 1995:26). These connections are opened by and continue to open social and virtual spaces of communication for building up new knowledge repertoires. The specifics and particularities of knowledge in a locality are not eliminated by processes of "glocalisation", but are brought into new contexts and new forms of meaning. For a researcher the double perspective of the constitution of locality and the configuration of translocality is now a methodological and empirical prerequisite. "Glocalisation" is therefore a relational project. The shift towards the "local" in research, in academic and in development discourse on - and increasingly in - southern countries was mainly due to the challenge of universally valid knowledge in the progress of deconstructivist, post-structuralist, feminist

and post-colonial approaches (Gupta/Ferguson, 1992:6). Since the end of the grand narratives and of hegemonic development approaches, the perspective has turned towards local realities. The empirical focus on the multiple locations of knowledge production and on the plurality of cultural diversity in developing countries is now supported by four trends:

1. In the field of **social-anthropology** the complex organisation of local knowledge has been well documented - actually since the begin of social-anthropological fieldwork – and has gained increasingly international attention in particular through publications by Mark Hobart, Clifford Geertz, Norman and Anne Long.
2. The concept of **eco-feminism** elaborated by Vandana Shiva in the context of India gives insights into the processes of marginalisation of female knowledge in agricultural production and changing gender relations on one hand as well as on the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of knowledge through external regimes (ownership debate) on the other hand.
3. A growing **reflexive critique** on mainstream development planning (definition of development goals, criteria, means) comes from development planners and organisations, pointing out the unintentional consequences of development interventions and the negative effects on devaluation of local knowledge.
4. **Post-colonial studies** question and challenge the dominance of western theory and science, especially dichotomic concepts of “modern” versus “traditional”, “local” versus “global”, “developed” versus “developing” etc.. They emphasis the existence of the “other” as well as the multiple sites of knowledge production and cultural diversity.

Recognition of the diversity of local capacities of knowledge - beyond romantics, homogenising, instrumentalising and mystification - is a condition avoiding constructing men and women living in developing countries as mere recipients of knowledge and as target-groups for development. What counts more than dependency on external expert knowledge is a certain autonomy in having the ability and potential to search for societal solutions in reference to the reliability of knowledge gained and the availability of new elements of

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the “Public Communication of Science and Technology” (PCST) Conference on “Scientific Knowledge and Cultural Diversity”, 3 - 6 June 2004, Barcelona, Spain

knowledge.

Instead of adapting approaches, which categorise and systematise knowledge in vague, static and dichotomic descriptions such as “traditional”, “indigenous” or “modern” - I prefer an *agency- and process-oriented conceptual and theoretical approach* that takes the social organisation and order of knowledge into consideration and in its consequences integrates aspects of politics, history, identity and power relations.

The actors I refer to in this paper are women’s groups and women’s organisations in Ghana, who have formed an “epistemic culture” at local, regional and even national level (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:1) which is connected with the interactive social and electronically supported World Wide Women’s Web. Within this setting, knowledge is generated, exchanged, disseminated and finally on an abstract level translated into new development approaches. The common aim is to bring about social change. An epistemic culture is defined as a culture that “creates and warrants knowledge” (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:1), for example in practices, symbols, processes and structures. In its societal relevance knowledge not only permeates social life and structures societies, but is a highly politicised issue in the public sphere. The ability to challenge the local-global order of knowledge underlies new forms of social structure established through translocal social ties. The establishment of this framework took place over the last 25 years, during and in the aftermath of the four World Conferences on Women<sup>2</sup>. Using different and multiple forms of communication emerging as a necessity for bridging distances and in connecting localities as well as the electronically “connected” with the “unconnected”, those living in rural parts of Ghana who do not have direct contact with new communication media. My intention is to show how multiple forms of communication co-exist. Instead of an often anticipated one-dimensional shift from oral to written cultures, such as Walter Ong (1982) predicted for developing countries, I argue on the basis of plurality and complementarity of communicative media indicating the existence of “multiple modernities” within one region<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> These conferences took place in 1975 in Mexico, in 1980 in Copenhagen, in 1985 in Nairobi and in 1995 in Beijing.

<sup>3</sup> The main argument of the paper is based on a one-year empirical fieldwork project in Ghana conducted between 1998-1999 (see Mueller, 2002).

While oral history has a temporal reference towards the past, Information and Communication Technology has a spatial reference. It is important to note here that the social (trans-) reality of globalisation represents major challenges to our academic ideas and the use of appropriate instruments of describing and analysing processes within and across social entities such as nations, communities and societies. I have deliberately chosen the categories of time and space in analysing the three dimensions of knowledge that are social, temporal and spatial (Schütz/Luckmann, 1974) opening the perspective towards crossing existing horizons as well as shaping new ones.

### **Narrating the Past - Shaping the Future**

Oral history is a practice of remembering its own past in the presence<sup>4</sup>. Jan Vansina (1985) classifies different forms of oral sources such as personal voices, proverbs, reminiscences, eyewitness accounts, hearsay, poetry or even visions. Besides narratives, messages can also be expressed and transmitted via physical performances. Not the complete history is remembered or told, but those moments of the past which are of relevance for the present. The question of authenticity is substituted by the question of selectivity. Constructing either self-experienced or narrated past events becomes of individual *and* social importance over real time. The interpretation is time-bound on the one hand and actor-bound on the other. In present Ghana, history is still actively embedded in a process of “reflexive modernisation” (Lash, 1994:113-115): by reflecting and acting on social constraints women refer to, reconstruct and include historical aspects in their discursive and strategic struggle for expanding their room for manoeuvre from the private to the public sphere. The core of the struggle is to (re-)gain social and political power.

### **Being the “*aberewa nyansafo*”<sup>5</sup>**

The content of oral history deals with the notion of female participation in “traditional” political institutions. The scene of action in the following is a small village in the Brong-

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<sup>4</sup> As a research method it serves to reconstruct history at a micro-level and is an attempt towards better understanding how women and men react to and act on changing socio-political conditions in their daily lives.

<sup>5</sup> *Aberewa nyansafo* literally means to keep the wisdom and knowledge of the old women.

Ahafo Region which does not distinguish itself too much from any other village or town in southern Ghana.

The past - in particular the time-span of post-colonial Ghana following independence in 1957 - is remembered and actively articulated by Subqueenmothers, who are female heads of their extended families and who were (and still are) informally educated by their maternal grandmothers. Having organised themselves in regular meetings, they critically examine past and present development and discuss the negative consequences of modernity such as environmental destruction around their village, the impoverishment of families, the rise in teenage pregnancies and the problematic employment situation experienced by young people. These eight Subqueenmothers are elected by their family members and are formally “enstooled”<sup>6</sup> in public ceremonies at the Chief’s palace. From the time of election, they are in charge of the informal education of the young male and female generation within their families, as well as settling disputes within and between families. With the exception of one, who is a teacher, all of them make their living as farmers. Within the family they act as complements to the Subchiefs, who are the male heads of families but unlike the Subqueenmothers are allowed to participate in meetings at the Chief’s palace. The only woman entitled to attend meetings at the Chief’s palace is the Queenmother who is the highest representative of women in the town. Both the Chief and the Queenmother belong to the royal family as descendants of the founders of the town, whereas the Subchiefs and Subqueenmothers belong to families who immigrated at a later stage. Legitimation of the kinship order is manifested by occupying a royal black stool (*akomua tuntum*). The formation of “traditional” institutions with the Subqueenmothers and the Queenmother on the female side, and the Subchiefs and Chief on the male side constitutes “parallel political structures” or a “dual-sex system” (Kaplan, 1997:XXXI; Okonjo, 1976:45), a system which covers seven of ten regions in Ghana. The formal duality bears de facto asymmetries. Although entitled to participate at the Chief’s palace, Queenmothers are powerless in the decision-making process during meetings. They are often absent from their villages, forced to make their income in larger cities. The new constitution of Ghana (1994) which politically strengthens “traditional” institutions, has not yet included Queenmothers in the decision-making process and excludes them from receiving state allowances. Every town Chief receives about 100.000 Cedis<sup>7</sup> in state allowance per month. The palace nowadays is the main political institution of a town

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<sup>6</sup>“Enstooled” means to receive a special wooden carved stool.

and has judicial, economic, political and representative functions. It is also a financial place where money such as from visitors or from gold mining companies exchanges hands.

When reflecting on the decay of living conditions, Subqueenmothers analysed the reasons for this change primarily attributing it to asymmetries within “traditional” institutions, specifically to their restriction to the family context and their exclusion from meetings in the Chief’s palace. They compared their present “weak” situation with the “strong” position held by old women in the past within the context of the family and the town.

These old women (*obapanyin*) had a tremendous influence on health and on environment, in solving social and individual problems and were responsible for educating the younger generation. The transfer of knowledge was organised along the two principles of gender and seniority. It was transmitted within the family context from grandmother to granddaughter and from grandfather to grandson. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the older generation to educate the next but one generation in matters of agriculture, the proper storage of crops, health and many other necessary practices for coping with daily life. This knowledge was transmitted on the way to the farm, during farm work, on the compound or in special rituals such as *bagoro*, a life-dance ritual exclusively for young girls. It was performed together with the old women who introduced the young girls to the spirits of the water and educated them in matters of sexuality. The young women received gifts such as land, goods, cooking utensils and cloths - capital for investing towards their future economic independence.

The nature of transmitted knowledge was based on experience and proven practices. Due to its long historical duration, it sedimented the meaning of action in an “experimental depth” (Schütz/Luckmann, 1974:113). Knowledge was secured, shared and socially accepted by other societal members via processes of legitimisation, turning knowledge of individuals into an “objective fact” (Berger/Luckmann, 1966). Old women legitimised their knowledge via mediation thereof in symbolic spaces such as worshipping family gods by pouring libation to wooden carved family stools as well as worshipping town gods at a central cemented stone located in the middle of the town.

At times of sickness, old women performed cleaning rituals by sweeping houses, compounds

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<sup>7</sup> Roughly 50 Euros.



and streets. Accompanied by singing and dancing, they swept the dust outside the town, preventing the sickness from (re-)entering. By worshipping at the riverside old women transcended the space between the natural and spiritual worlds. Messages told to a certain kind of fish were thought to be carried along to reach larger rivers and finally the supreme god (*nyame*). Nature was conceptualised as another “parallel” world (Luig/von Oppen, 1995:6) existing besides the social world. Through such rituals the river was a source of gaining power, enabling old women to exercise social influence. It was further forbidden for all the people in town to cross the river on the week-day of being “born” (Tuesday). For the town-people this meant not being allowed to farm on that specific day, since it was not possible to reach their farms without crossing the river. This “ritual topography” (Schlee, 1990:1) of nature symbolically contributed to the constitution of social identities.

In summary, old women had a transformative power in society, whether in defence, prevention, education or in the solution of societal or individual problems. They exercised power to transform social relations based on their experience. Women were able to transcend their experience through symbolic “spaces-in-between”: between nature and society, disease and society, gods and society, and between generations<sup>8</sup>. Within their extended families old women and men held a strong - sometimes even authoritarian - position. Old women are entitled to co-operate with the Queenmother to form female political structures whereas old men allied with the Chief to form the male political structure. The consultation of old women for advice – whether by the Queenmother or by the Chief and his male elders - was termed as consulting the *aberewa nyansafo*, the wisdom and experience of old women. In particular since the 1960s - with the influence of Christianity - symbolic spaces have gradually lost their meaning. Knowledge is no longer secured and its institutionalised transfer has become gradually blurred. The change in the symbolic order had consequences for the social order of knowledge. Old women have lost their strong position within the family as well as their socio-political influence in town matters. Political development in post-colonial Ghana with a strong emphasis on modernisation has actually weakened “traditional” institutions as a whole.

Subqueenmothers remember this specific constellation of responsibility and socio-political influence enjoyed by old women in the past. Some of them experienced and witnessed the

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<sup>8</sup> This picture is common in other parts of Africa where elderly women had a transformative effect on society. However, power also has destructive effects. In many countries nowadays, elderly women are accused of witchcraft and the causation of disease, which in some cases can result in huts being burnt to the ground (Auslander, 1993: 147).

actions of old women during their youth or were told about them through narratives by their grandmothers. As the formal successors of the old women, they have adopted the social identity of *aberewa nyansafo*, having the wisdom and experience of old women although none of them is older than 45. Dissatisfied with the imposed restrictions towards family matters, they used the argument of the *aberewa nyansafo* for expanding their influence beyond the family context. Their objective was to enter the Chief's palace and to participate alongside the Subchiefs in meetings. In a long struggle, this powerful argument convinced the elders and the Queenmother, who at first had resisted to support the objective of the Subqueenmothers to give them the right to participate. Their intention was twofold: firstly, political and secondly, to use the political space for legitimising actions referring back to societal issues. Subqueenmothers re-defined long-gone symbolic spaces and established new social contexts of communication. Within the family context, all young girls have to be educated in sexual matters by visiting and talking to the Subqueenmothers, who also inform them on HIV/AIDS and the importance of (secondary) education. This practice refers to the former ritual of *bagoro* and is accepted by young girls independent of their educational background. In some villages this institutionalised form of informal education has resulted in a drop in teenage pregnancies and in an increasing number of young women attending secondary school. "*There is a logic in this cultural practice*" proudly explained one Subqueenmother of a larger town in the Brong-Ahafo region the success of their re-defined innovation.

Other important issues on their agenda are environmental topics such as revitalising the riverside and the dried out river basin. Chiefs in the past had forbidden the (old) women to go there in general to catch fish and worship the gods. It was a common practice when catching fish to dig out the sand washed ashore – to enable the water to run smoothly. The riverside was gradually occupied by the Subchiefs worshipping the gods by slaughtering sheep. Now, with environmental arguments and attempts to make use of the knowledge learnt in meetings with other women's organisations, Subqueenmothers have taken to planting trees along the riverside as well as deepening and widening the river. The action intends to be more than being merely restricted to environmental motivation. Symbolically they reappropriated nature as an old symbol of power, proving the reliability of their knowledge composed of elements of knowledge they acquired from their grandmothers and in addition from new sources such as regional women's organisations dealing with environmental topics.

Whether concerning environmental, social, educational or economic issues, Subqueenmothers referred to long-gone symbolic spaces, refined them, integrated new elements of knowledge, and gave new meanings to their practices while strategically aiming at political and social empowerment.

Practising the past is not aimed at a replication thereof. The options of appropriating the past as a (re-)source lie in negotiating power and gender relations as well as in the creation process of social identities. Integrating past elements into a new temporal and social context results in a completely new scenario. In the past, as mentioned above, old women were not allowed to attend meetings at the palace. The logic of practice was, that their day-to-day experiences and knowledge was used as a source in political decision-making processes at the Chief's/Queenmother's palace in the form of frequent consultation. Now, the logic of practice is the other way round: continuing presence in political decision-making processes serves for legitimising knowledge and innovative everyday practices. "The negotiation of social memory is in the fact history in the making" as Heike Schmidt (2002:203) in reference to Elizabeth Tonkin's book *Narrating our Past* (1992) has pointed out on the core of the issue. The "instructive past and intended futures" mark the turning points of social marginalisation of symbolic female spaces and of the social order of knowledge. History as a re-representation in real time, becomes - as the episode has shown - even more important in a globalised age, contributing towards shaping the social and cultural diversity of localities and the formation of knowledge repertoires.

### **Contesting and Negotiating Tradition**

While the notion of "tradition" itself was not part of negotiation at the level of local institutions, the emphasis shifts at regional and national level. At both levels, (Sub-) Queenmothers try to enter the Regional and National Houses of Chiefs (the "secret" government of Ghana). Both Houses were founded in post-colonial Ghana: the Regional House of Chiefs in 1961 and the National House of Chiefs in 1971. Each gender has a different interpretation of the time intensity of tradition. At these levels the power of interpretation is on the Chiefs' side. Chiefs defend their sovereignty by saying that "*tradition*

*is the established way of doing things in the community*". They refer to that social setting as having already opened itself for transformation while institutions resist change. Chiefs define tradition in a one-dimensional perspective exclusively bound to the past. Implicitly, the discourse points to their resistance to sharing political and financial power with the (Sub-) Queenmothers. This resistance does not however remain unanswered by the (Sub-) Queenmothers. In the history of Ghana it was the first time that scientific knowledge was incorporated in a gender discourse. In reference to research results of an in-depth scientific study on the topic of "Women in Public Life" (1998) conducted at the University of Legon and in collaboration with the National Council of Women and Development, (Sub-) Queenmothers deconstruct the arguments of the Chiefs in common workshops and in the wider public and actively use popular media such as the main newspaper of Ghana (Daily Graphic, 20.08.1998) for spreading research results as well as their comments effectively. Research results pointed to existing gender inequalities within "traditional" institutions and came up with clear suggestions for achieving gender equality (e.g. sharing financial resources).

(Sub-)Queenmothers continue to demand the recognition of gender equality by obtaining permission to participate. *"Times are changing and we also have been re-examining our roles and responsibilities"* (Sub-)Queenmothers legitimise the existence of traditional institutions as such which they would further support through their appropriate function within as repositories of tradition and customs as well as through their innovative knowledge repertoire.

The common grounds for this collective struggle are laid in the Queenmothers' association which was founded by a Subqueenmother and opens membership to both Queenmothers and Subqueenmothers. In contrast to the continuing hierarchical relationship between Queenmothers and Subqueenmothers based on kinship at local level, the organisational structure follows democratic rules and regulations (e.g. elections). In regular meetings, old elements of knowledge are intensively discussed as well as new elements of knowledge integrated. The dynamics of exchange are upheld by sharing knowledge with other women's organisations or via individual mobility. One Subqueenmother travels to other African countries and obtains information on HIV/AIDS projects or visits the New Year School at the

University of Ghana (Legon) for the purpose of participating in an open, critical forum which discusses a wide range of national development topics. Through personal mobility, this knowledge is further disseminated among other (Sub-)Queenmothers and submitted to negotiation in their respective village. The Queenmothers' association supports a critical counter-discourse against western interventions and tries with their concepts on development or on (expensive) imported products such as baby food to strengthen their discursive power on the validity of their own knowledge. Innovative knowledge is realised in specific projects such as bee-keeping or soap production. Knowledge and self-defined development methods maintain "innovative traditions", in the long run setting clear boundaries to keep out negative external influences.

To sum up: via self-organisation, women in the traditional settings have created new social spaces (e.g. meetings) at village, regional and national level. Four aspects are of concern:

1. the integration of history;
2. the integration of scientific knowledge;
3. the reflection on everyday knowledge and practices;
4. the critical examination and active transformation of the social/symbolic order.

These four aspects together generate a specific kind of interwovenness at a meta-level: **knowledge on knowledge**. Now being aware of their potential in forming a new knowledge order, communication is addressed to a public audience.

### **New Networks for Action**

New "nodes" between women's organisations have designed frames for integrating global discourses into their life-world and for discussing personal living-conditions. Once a month in every regional capital as well as in the state capital, Accra, female representatives from various women's organisations meet<sup>9</sup>, regardless of their educational, ethnic, economic or social background.

The past becomes the point of reference for analysing social change with regard to the present. Within the audience, open questions concern, e.g. the physical strength of women, wondering why their grandmothers were older and stronger, despite having given birth to more children. They also question the rising number of sudden deaths among women which they attribute to economic hardship. Other points of discussion concern increase in illness due to the abuse of chemical treatments of agricultural products, or violence against women. This process of sharing knowledge, exchanging experiences and learning from each other not only indicates reflection on individual cases but also includes a critical examination of the dominant -western oriented- modernisation of agricultural or medical (knowledge) systems. Distrust in modern systems and growing awareness of production of risks through such systems brings to light the “pathologies of modernity” (Habermas, 1981). The rise of a culture of experts coupled with a state-introduced bureaucratic structure of planning development has contributed to the marginalisation and devaluation of local knowledge. The long history of power relations between the state and its people followed a rhetoric construction of underdevelopment in order to bring about and to legitimise development activities through state actors. Two forces have established a “system of ignorance” (Lachenmann, 1994) in the present: firstly, the lack of appropriate concepts on development and secondly, the social marginalisation of local communities in general and the devaluation of gendered knowledge in specific, resulting in a loss of individual or social control of knowledge. Ascribing local actors as ignorant is still reproduced in formal school education. In agricultural subjects western practices such as the use of irrigation systems or technical equipment continue to be taught although they are far from being adaptable to or affordable in the local context. It is this “system of ignorance” which has become a critical object of analysis. The intensive debate on the multiple forms of knowledge has opened a self-reflexive learning process for solving societal and individual problems.

In its connection with global women’s health, peace and environmental movements, the initiator of these “critique-oriented” platforms, the National Council of Women and Development (NCWD), has changed its original mandate as a “national machinery” towards organising from below. The former top-down oriented Women in Development approach (WID approach) was relinquished in favour of a pluralistic approach by integrating the

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<sup>9</sup> Such as job-based, Church, Queenmothers’, community or welfare associations.

diversity of interests of women's groups into its activities and working towards mitigating the detrimental effect on women's lives. Paradigmatic strategies aim at improving living conditions of women by, e.g. challenging gender constructs, intervening in national policies or in reformulating (traditional, modern) laws.

The multidimensional and topical networking between women's organisations forms a translocal "social apparatus" (Berger/Luckmann, 1974). Through these channels leading from the rural to the urban area and vice versa - based on face-to-face interaction - information, experience and knowledge are gathered, exchanged and disseminated continuously and nation-wide.

### **Strategic Information Channelling between Worlds**

Using the Internet as a medium for communication and as a strategic tool for development has attracted women's organisations, groups and movements world-wide. First active use of the Internet was in the international struggle regarding violence against women. The expansion of the scope of communication geographically towards a global "communicative accessibility" (Luhmann, 1997) among women, serves not only to connect different local realities but to transcend the diversity of local realities onto a global sphere. Gilian Youngs termed this power of transcendence towards the global level "shared politics" (Youngs, 1999). Shared politics is the active sharing of local realities at a global level meaning that people in Ghana know what is of concern for women living in other parts of the world.

The Internet is used for building and bridging distant relations through multiple small "face-to-screen" (Knorr-Cetina/Bruegger, 2002:923) interactions. Instable electricity as well as a lack of financial resources for buying hardware and software, means the Internet is still an exclusive medium of communication; individuals rarely have the possibility to establish private networks. The global "digital divide" (Hamelink, 2002: 6) is reproduced at national level. Only the offices of women's organisations in the capital, Accra, are equipped with computers, financed by external donors. As new political subjects, the representatives of women's organisations are "brokers" and mediators in channelling information along and between the local-global scales. Their situation as knowledge and information intermediaries is peculiar and it should be a matter of further research whether they contribute to reduce

social inequalities or, on the contrary, enhance them.

Electronic networks not only distribute power, but also enable new forms of power, constituting the double feature of the electronic space as “cyber-segmentation” (Sassen, 1998:178). An example: The network WiLDAF (Women in Law and Development Africa) uses ICT at a pan-African and international level. WiLDAF was founded in 1991 on the initiative of six women from different parts of Africa and has already spread to 26 African countries with its headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe. The common framework on women’s rights and development includes topics such as globalisation, environment, HIV/AIDS, violence, poverty, economics and trade. Within decentralised organisational structures - emphasising and realising a “power on the bottom” approach - every country defines its own focal points: e.g. WiLDAF-Ghana has chosen inheritance rights, violence against women, maintenance of children and marriage law. Every year a new law is added, becoming an objective of research and policy.

Electronic communication at pan-African level serves to distribute up-to-date newsletters or emergency letters seeking for assistance in difficult times and even extends beyond the African continent in terms of common actions addressing international development organisations. Electronically disseminated petitions are used to influence the policies of international development organisations (World Bank, IMF, WTO) and their specific interventions into national politics. WiLDAF-Mauritius initiated a campaign against the planned structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF. Well-documented with many similar examples in other African countries, women feared a liberalisation of their economy and the collapse of a well-established welfare state through the reduction of national social security budgets. Concern included the negative consequences on the lives of women and children in particular and “selling out” labour and goods in general. With the support of all WiLDAF members, they mobilised other women’s organisations at pan-African level and beyond via collaboration with women’s organisations from the North. The outcome of this activity should not be counted in terms of success or failure. What becomes clear is the fact that use of the Internet in a political struggle over “opposing views” (Sassen, 1998:194) is an expression of resistance, empowering women to act and react on imposed policies. In its core, the electronic space is used for the defence, maintenance and security of the local life-world



by combining the two processes of 1. strategic linking and 2. the links of strategies. Paradoxically, the “disembedded”, “deterritorialised” global sphere strengthens and empowers local actions. This relationship between the virtual and real spaces has been described by Gilian Youngs (2002) in reference to McLuhan as “mediation” indicating on the complexity between technology, human communication and subjectivity.

In a wider sense, Savio (2002:21) attributes positive aspects to new media connections through dissolving the monopolisation of news and information through state forces and control. “Democratising” therefore means dissolving monopolies of information steering and simultaneous access by actors of civil society to an alternative national and international political agenda setting by building alliances and networking as well as by mobilising resources.

How does networking along multiple connections shape the specific life-worlds of women ? In the small village in Ghana, which is already familiar to us, the topic of law became of concern as one woman claimed that her former husband, a taxidriver with a steady and regular income, and who is the father of her seven-year old child, refused to pay its school fees. The case was brought to a lawyer at the office of the National Council of Women and Development. The representative of the NCWD who is a member of WiLDAF Ghana successfully assisted her in all matters concerning her rights and court procedures. In another case on the distribution of inheritance between two families, the widow of the deceased man won the struggle to claim her share. Inheritance law was changed - favouring widows and family members (sons/daughters) of the deceased - during the 1990s after a lengthy discussion between the state and women’s organisations. Women in the village are now aware of this new law and assert their rights. WiLDAF-Ghana integrates these experiences at local/national level in its overall framework and contributes to the programmatic development of the concept on gender, law and development<sup>10</sup>.

The pan-African network WiLDAF is not an exception in using the Internet for multidimensional and multilevel political struggle. Russian women’s organisations set up a

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, intensive research is conducted to obtain expertise and data bases, which have proved to be important in convincing politicians and in setting up ways of priority. One study in progress, which I came across during my fieldwork in Ghana, was on gender and land rights.

common virtual platform ([www.owl.ru](http://www.owl.ru)) as early as 1994 aimed at empowerment during the process of social and political transformation. In South America women's organisations avoid high travel costs via virtual discussion and setting of agendas. Many other virtual organised forms of enabling actions like [www.womenaction.org](http://www.womenaction.org), [www.femmeafric.org](http://www.femmeafric.org), [www.flamme.org](http://www.flamme.org) and their implications for women are well documented in the book [Women@Internet](#) (Harcourt, 1999) drawing our attention to the growing importance of virtuality as a new condition for defending localities in a global arena.

### **Conclusion: Belonging to Multiple Spaces of Knowledge Production**

Finally, I want to discuss the (future) potential of societal knowledge in a southern country such as Ghana. The current societal knowledge repertoire is composed of different sources, each generating knowledge through its specific structures whether in the everyday context, in the scientific context or in the context of new media. One important aspect is that these different sources do not stand in isolation but are connected along multiple internal and internal-external relations. Three key elements form the societal knowledge content: historical knowledge, scientific knowledge and “informational” knowledge.

The present dynamics of interwovenness are shaped by a structure of overlapping by social and virtual spaces. Individuals belong to multiple spaces while simultaneously having contacts to different sources of knowledge. This mutual inclusion of different knowledge sources and contents establishes a meta-level of knowledge on knowledge: second-order knowledge. It is this new feature of the societal “explication” and “communicability” on knowledge in the public, which makes knowledge a current relevant factor for social change and speeds up the emergence of this particular knowledge society. Articulation and politicisation enhance growing control over one's own sources of knowledge. In its self-reflexive appearance, the sites of knowledge production will remain context-dependent, therefore keeping and maintaining cultural diversity.

Two forms of communication sustain „explication“ and „communicability“ of knowledge: Oral History and ICT. The specific differences are:

Oral History	ICT
Limited scope: local audience	Unlimited scope: global audience
Communicative focus on local life-world	Communicative focus on glocal life-world
Microcosm, limited personal mobility	Macrocosm, global mobilisation
Context-specific (language)	Context-independent (language)
Subject dependence	Technical dependence

The composition of knowledge refers to a pluralistic pattern of internal and internal-external relations and connections. As researchers we have to deal *not with one or the other*, but with *one as well as the other*.

Within the development arena, actors have created their own systems of participation in development and defined alternative paradigms of development (Savio, 2002:22). The pragmatic and paradigmatic alternatives lie in keeping the diversity of knowledge systems and securing plurality, maintaining it as practice-oriented instead of theory-oriented (Nederveen Pieterse, 1998:364). Implicitly it is a rejection of development as a linear process; instead development takes place in a reflexive process of opening ways and less in formulating goals. Mainstream international policies by claiming a “development through knowledge” approach (World Bank, 1999) based on the ongoing assumption of an asymmetric relationship and of an existing knowledge gap between northern and southern countries barely recognise these trends.

I have repeatedly pointed out the interdependency between the structure of knowledge production and social structure. Forming a new innovative meta-level of knowledge through integration of multiple sites of knowledge generation and production, bears the chances of orientation towards a personal stock of knowledge. In the long run, critical self-reflection of the stock of knowledge makes individuals and societies less dependent on external knowledge and interventions. It strengthens the trust in the reliability of personal/organisational

knowledge capacities and their innovative potentials for solving individual or societal issues as well as minimising risks. Defence of knowledgeability still remains an important task in keeping, gaining or expanding these potentials. Arturo Escobar, who studied the procedures of South American environmental groups defending their livelihood against external interventions, has explored just how difficult this struggle can be within a complex arena of local, national and international relations. Knowledge is embedded in a “politics of place” (Escobar, 1999) making a locality even more important as a site of fieldwork and theory.

We can conclude that cultural diversity remains exclusive through its existence in a process of globalisation. Exclusiveness is not to be conceptualised as a cut-off, but as exclusiveness through interwovenness. It is still an important prerequisite for us to reflect on our categories of analysing, explaining and understanding “the other” as well as the construction of our own scientific world (Nederveen Pieterse, 1998). When dealing with the notion of an inclusive “other” I suggest to conceptualise it as a relationship within a connected world established through mutual interconnectedness along the local-global scale. Scientific categories should be opened to capture the diversity of culture and knowledge existing in a locality as well as being transparent for the “other” - our research partners. Fluid integration between scientific and local knowledge via mutual integrative processes remains a challenge. Practically, we can follow the manifest of Kwasi Prah who suggested that: *“First we have to learn to look at ourselves, hear others about ourselves, and above all, allow others to speak for themselves”* (Prah, 1997: 444-445).

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